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Trends. The Cognitive Politics of Threat Assessment

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Abstract: This Trends article discusses the mission of the United States' (US) independent commission investigating the 9/11 attacks and the partial availability of data/evidence to that body as committee members attempted to carry out that mission.

One method of evaluating the adequacy of threat assessment procedures is to analyze such procedures leading up to a seeming intelligence failure. A case in point concerns the mission of the United States' (US) independent commission investigating 9/11 chaired by former New Jersey Governor Thomas Kean. One might posit that all extant information relevant to the 9/11 attacks would be made available to the commission—even if the creation of such a commission was not initially supported by the US President—but both availability and rationales for partial availability have been problematic.

For example, access to the President's daily intelligence briefings leading up to 9/11 was publicly announced as being only in edited format and only being available to some representatives of the commission. These representatives only would be able to read and take notes on the briefings, while the White House would have the authority to review and edit these notes on the pretext of protecting sensitive information and sources and methods of collecting it.

Moreover, the rationale for the initial editing procedure seems to be incompatible with an essential feature of threat assessment's accepted practice. This rationale seems to be based on the proposition that only intelligence items that explicitly mention al Qaeda would be relevant—e.g., all items just about South Africa or China would not be relevant. Yet any competent intelligence analyst or risk assessor would assert that other information not explicitly mentioning al Qaeda might still be relevant to generating context and even support and operational data relevant to the 9/11 attacks.

One might question the independence of a committee associated with such procedures and rationales. One might question the appropriateness of an entity potentially implicated in an intelligence failure being authorized to filter access and edit material dealing with that failure as others having a public trust attempt to get to the bottom of things. One might also question the sophisticated elegance of quantitative and qualitative threat assessment procedures as depicted in textbooks in isolation from basic cognitive politics that subvert threat assessment intent and purpose. (See Jervis, R. (2002). Signaling and perception: Drawing inferences and projecting images.

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